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ABSTRACT

This study examined the portrayal of love, marriage, and sexuality in 11 romantic and nonromantic Disney animated films. Results showed that four out of five of the nonromantic films had male leads, with males occupying significantly more screen time than females. Half of the romantic films had female leads, who occupied significantly more screen time than males. More lead characters suffered from mother absence than father absence, wherever parental presence could be determined. Females were more often depicted sexually and engaged in passive love-related roles than were males. Males engaged in active love-related, stereotyped roles and made more references to marriage and weddings than did females. Love-related and sexually-related portrayals have increased in recent romantic films of the 1990s, compared to films of the 1950s. A comparable number of or even fewer references to marriage were made in recent films than in films of the 1950s. The two lesser known films, "The Three Caballeros" and "Bongo," had themes involving sexual harassment and physical violence. Tables of screen time percentages and ratios for male and female leads and of statistical data of variants are included. (AS)

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ED 407 118

Running head: MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF LOVE

Media Portrayals of Love, Marriage & Sexuality for Child Audiences:

A Select Content Analysis of Walt Disney Animated Family Films

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Abstract

This study analyzed 11 selected Disney animated family films (3 old romantic, 3 new romantic, 3 nonromantic, 2 lesser known) examining portrayals of love, marriage, and sexuality. Results included the following: (a) Both love and sexually-related depictions have increased dramatically in more recent romantic films of the 1990s, as compared with films produced during the 1950s; whereas, films of the 1990s featured comparable or slightly fewer references to marriage and weddings, as compared to films of the 1950s; (b) Across all film types, lead males occupied a variety of roles, whereas females were cast as leads in romantic films only and were more likely to be depicted as married or attached to a male figure by the end of the film; (c) Females in love engaged in fewer and more passive love-related behaviors, and were more often depicted sexually. Males engaged in active, stereotyped love-related behaviors and made more references to marriage and weddings; (d) When parental presence could be determined for lead characters, significantly more lead characters suffered from mother absence than father absence; and (e) themes in the two lesser known films, including sexual harassment and violence between male and female partners were of concern. The findings were consistent with developmental gender role and media research and with empirical research on love and sexuality among adults. Implications for children's conceptual development and directions for future research were discussed.

Media Portrayals of Love, Marriage & Sexuality for Child Audiences: A Select Content Analysis of Walt Disney Animated Family Films

Parents typically do not discuss the topic of romantic love, marriage, or sexuality with children younger than adolescence (Roberts, Kline, & Gagnon, 1978); hence, for many young children their first exposure to these themes likely comes from media sources. While there is a body of research examining television programming, film and cartoon portrayals on children's perceptions of gender roles (e.g., Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974; Welch, Huston-Stein, Wright, & Plehal, 1979), to date, no content analyses have focused specifically on portrayals of love, romance, marriage or sexuality in children's media.

In light of the extensive literature revealing social modeling to be a powerful influencer of children's concepts and behavior, it would seem important to examine closely media produced for consumption by children. The primary purpose of this study was to examine portrayals of love, romance, marriage, and sexuality as depicted in selected Walt Disney Studios' animated family films as a function of gender and film type (e.g., romantic versus non-romantic films). Walt Disney films were selected given their ubiquitous presence and almost universal appeal (e.g., theatre releases, videocassette, aggressive merchandising). Indeed, as early as 1954, it was estimated that a third of the world's population had seen at least one Disney film (Time, 1954, p. 42).

Method

Films & Coders

Eleven Disney animated films were selected: (a) three older romantic films from the same decade--Cinderella, Lady and the Tramp, Sleeping Beauty; (b) three recent romantic films--The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin; (c) three non-romantic films--Pinocchio, Jungle Book, The Rescuers Down Under; and (d) two less well-known films--The Three Caballeros, Bongo (see Appendix A for complete film listing). Films were categorized as romantic or nonromantic based on the description of the film on the video dust jacket produced by Disney.

All 11 films were analyzed and coded by pairs of trained observers. A modified consensus rating model similar to that used by Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, and Davis (1993) for scoring music television videos was employed. Interrater reliability ratings for all 11 films and all variables ranged from 84% to 99% (M = 93%, SD = 6).

Coding Categories

A total of 377 variables were identified and coded for all male and female characters into the following categories: Love-Romance Variables (194 LRV), Marriage-Wedding Variables (41 MWV), Sexually-related Variables (100 SXV), Film Demographics Variables (18 FDV), and Miscellaneous Variables (24 MCV).

Results

Overall Sex Differences

Four out of five of the non-romantic films featured male leads, while only half of the romantic films had female leads. All lead females start the film as single and are shown at the film's conclusion as married or attached to one male; this was not true for male leads. In romantic films, females occupied significantly more screen time than their male love interest, whereas in nonromantic films, males captured significantly more screen time than females (Mann-Whitney, two-tailed U = 1.0, $p < .05$).

When parental presence could be determined for lead characters, a Chi square analysis revealed that significantly more lead characters suffered from mother absence than father absence, χ^2 (1, N = 22) = 8.91 , p < .005.

Specific Sex Differences in Love, Marriage, and Sexual Behaviors

Females were depicted significantly more than males striking up coy love poses, giggling, primping their hair, and behaving in a sexual manner (all Mann-Whitney U's, p < .05). Males were portrayed as engaging in significantly more gift giving, tipping hat, chivalrous actions, kissing love target's hand, initiating hand holding, bragging, fighting, and chasing after love interest, asking for or referring to a date, falling in love at first sight, making references to marriage, and making references to weddings (all Mann-Whitney U's, p < .05).

Differences in Types of Films

Females engaged in more love-related behaviors than males in old romantic films, whereas this difference disappeared in the recent romantic films. Interestingly, across all romantic and nonromantic films, males made more references to marriage and weddings than females. In all film types, females were more often depicted in a sexual manner than males (Table 1).

Recent romantic films featured roughly 2.5 times more total references to love-related themes and 7.5 times more sexually-related portrayals than the older romantic films, while references to marriage and weddings were roughly comparable (Table 2).

The category of lesser known films contained disturbing messages to child audiences. While there were no references to marriage or weddings, these two films did include significant numbers of love-related and sexually-related depictions. "The Three Caballeros" is a loose collection of short, animated travelogue pieces involving Donald Duck and interspersed with live action shots featuring the songs, dances, or stories of South America and Mexico. What is striking about this film, however, is the extremely high frequency of sexually-related behaviors. In fact, of the 331 SEXT variables displayed in Table 3 for the category of lesser known films, 326 (98.5%) were from this film, with the most frequent behaviors from this category involving, for example, aggressively chasing females, perking of body parts in response to a provocative female, or making public noises at females in response to their perceived physical or sexual attributes. In the film "Bongo," male and female bear characters demonstrate their love by physically hitting each another across the face with such intensity that it causes the other to fall to the ground. The second half of this film features a song entitled, "Say It with a Slap" with lyrics condoning and urging the bears to slap each other as a sign of love (see Appendix B for the lyrics of this song).

Discussion

This study specifically examined the portrayal of love, marriage, and sexuality themes in Walt Disney's animated family feature films. Several notable findings emerged. First, females are not featured as extensively as males in Disney animated films, both in terms of percent of screen time or as lead characters, unless the film contains a central romantic plot. Males, on the other hand, are featured much more frequently as lead characters and with proportionately more screen time than females in nonromantic films. These results are entirely consistent with much research showing that, in general, females are underrepresented in the media and more likely to be cast in a leading role when the central plot includes themes of romance, family, or sexuality, and more likely to be married or attached to a significant other by the end of the film.(e.g., Gerbner, 1972; Levy, 1990; McGhee & Frueh, 1980; Signorielli, 1989).

Second, both love and sexually-related depictions have increased in more recent romantic films of the 1990s, as compared with films produced during the 1950s. The increased sexualization of females in the media is consistent with research on MTV showing women as engaging in significantly more implicit sexual and subservient behavior and more frequently being depicted as the object of sexual advances than men (Baxter, et al., 1985; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993). Interestingly, as compared to the films of the 1950s, references to marriage or weddings declined somewhat in the newer romantic films.

Third, a number of more specific sex differences were found for love, marriage, and sexually-related variables. Females engage in a small number of relatively passive behaviors signaling love to their male love interest; whereas, males engage in a rather large number of much more active, stereotyped behaviors designed to win over a female's interest. For example, females more frequently struck romantic or coy poses, giggled, primped their hair, and were depicted in sexualized ways. Moreover, lead females were always depicted as highly attractive and often voluptuous. Males in love, on the other hand, engaged in a host of active and chivalrous behaviors, including hat tipping, kissing a female's hand, fighting for the love interest, as well as stereotyped behaviors such as giving gifts to the love interest, initiating hand holding, bragging, and asking for or referring to dates. Interestingly, Disney males were significantly more likely to fall in love "at first sight" than females. This is not entirely consistent with previous studies that have found that while males report falling in love earlier than do females among dating couples (Kanin, Davidson, & Scheck, 1970) and newlyweds (Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981), there appears to be no sex difference for the dramatic event of falling in love "at first sight" (Kanin, Davidson, & Scheck, 1970). Finally and surprisingly, contrary to traditional sex role stereotypes, males made more references to marriage and weddings than did females. This would appear to contradict U.S. Census Bureau data showing for example, that a higher proportion of males in the population never marry as compared to females (Brehm, 1992, p.20). On the other hand, this result is consistent with research suggesting that married men enjoy greater advantages than married women (e.g., Gove, 1973).

Fourth, a somewhat unusual finding to emerge was that in this sample of Disney animated films involving human characters, both male and female lead characters are significantly more likely to suffer from maternal absence than paternal absence. This rather curious finding has not escaped the attention of journalists writing for mass media such as newspapers (e.g., Cotter, 1993; Klein, 1993; Kronke, 1995; Webber, 1994). In fact, an unnamed spokesman for Disney Studios contacted by a journalist writing for the Los Angeles Times responded to queries by stating that this trend of maternal absence is "purely coincidental," and was determined largely by the original fairy tales on which the Disney films are adapted.

Finally, of particular concern were the themes involving sexual harassment and the equating of physical violence with love that were depicted in the two lesser known films examined in this study. Although these films were only released in theaters no more than once or twice since 1945, they are, however, easily accessible for rental in many videostores today. The potentially harmful messages found in these two films are particularly problematic as unsuspecting parents who may rent these films for their children are not provided with a sufficiently detailed warning regarding the film's content.

Besides learning through direct interactions with others, Wright and Huston (1983) proposed that the powerful visual and auditory representations possible with media such as television or film "could induce active cognitive processing" (p. 841), especially among young children. Moreover, the potential for Disney films to influence children's attitudes becomes

stronger due not only to the almost ubiquitous popularity of Disney advertising and merchandising, but also to the easy and inexpensive availability of these films on videocassette. Indeed, a Harris Poll in 1992 (O'Steen, 1992), found that 82% of all American households possessed a VCR machine, compared with 54% five years ago; among higher income households led by people age 30 to 49 years in the eastern and western sections of the nation, this percentage increased to 92% owning and operating a VCR. In addition, 10% of all videocassettes rented in 1986, in the US were for children (Liebert & Sprafkin, 1988). Consequently, both the frequency and the corresponding effect that films such as Disney's may have on children's conceptual growth may be more pronounced today since feature films are now easily available through video rental or purchase, rather than through limited theater showings of past years.

The results of this study raise a number of important implications and directions for future research. First, given the absence of research on this topic, it is hoped that this study might serve as a basis for future investigations and inspire additional research directed at increasing uniformity and consensus in the measurement and terminology of this field. Second, although this content analysis does not address the issue of what children of different ages comprehend after viewing media featuring love, marriage, or sexually-related material, it represents a pioneering and necessary first step in quantifying depictions of love and marriage. Future research must examine the relation between media depictions and children's perceptions, in addition to further study of the other variables that may influence children's developing concepts of love, marriage, and sexuality (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, culture, media, family structure). Third, future research focusing on Disney films should be broadened to include a larger sample of films, especially the most recent releases which were unavailable on videotape at the time this study was undertaken. Fourth, while the Disney name and traditions are without a doubt beloved by many around the world as symbolizing "wholesome, family entertainment," this study reinforces the fact that the media, including the film industry, also represents a social and cultural institution that ultimately creates, produces, and disseminates ideological constructs in the form of a commercial mass product (Levy, 1990). Armed with this economic and political perspective, both researchers and the public might be better equipped to demand accountability and high quality programming from the media industries. Given the fundamental importance and developmental significance that love, marriage, and sex plays in most peoples' lives, we would be well-served to be aware of the messages that the entertainment industry and the popular media promote to our youngest citizens. Parents and teachers must learn to become critical consumers in the selection of material they make available to their children and develop effective means of discussing these issues with their children (e.g., Giroux, 1995). With goals such as those outlined above, future research into the developmental aspects of love, marriage, and sexuality promises to be both fruitful and exciting.

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Table 1

Screen Time Percentages and Ratios for Female and Male Lead Characters Across Film Types

Film Type Title (Year Released)	n (films)	Percent Screen Time & F/M Ratio for Leads % for Female Lead	% for Male Lead	F/M Ratio
Old Romantic	3			
"Cinderella" (1950)		33	5	6.6
"Lady and the Tramp" (1955)		40	25	1.6
"Sleeping Beauty" (1959)		27	19	1.4
subtotal		33	16	3.2
New Romantic	3			
"The Little Mermaid" (1989)		61	27	2.3
"Beauty and the Beast" (1991)		38	24	1.6
"Aladdin" (1992)		30	60	.5
subtotal		43	37	1.5
Nonromantic	3			
"Pinocchio" (1940)		0	42	0.0
"The Jungle Book" (1967)		3	69	0.1
"The Rescuers Down Under" (1990)		26	34	0.8
subtotal		10	48	0.3
Lesser Known	2			
"The Three Caballeros" (1945)		7	43	0.2
"Bongo" (1947)		22	78	0.3
subtotal		15	61	0.3

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Totals for Love, Marriage, and Sex Variables across Film Types by Gender

	Love, Marriage, and Sex Variables					
Film Type	LRV		MWV		SXV	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Old Romantic						
M	122.30	74.00	11.67	30.00	13.30	7.00
SD	6.11	18.36	1.53	7.81	14.01	10.39
Total	367.00	222.00	35.00	90.00	40.00	21.00
New Romantic						
M	274.30	230.00	8.67	24.00	109.67	38.00
SD	40.77	79.68	4.93	11.53	78.40	16.46
Total	823.00	690.00	26.00	72.00	329.00	114.00
Nonromantic						
M	44.00	40.00	1.30	7.67	21.67	4.67
SD	24.33	25.24	1.16	8.62	36.67	5.69
Total	132.00	120.00	4.00	23.00	65.00	14.00
Lesser Known						
M	149.50	245.50	.00	.00	105.00	60.00
SD	31.82	62.93	.00	.00	147.08	80.61
Total	299.00	491.00	.00	.00	210.00	120.00

Note. LRV: The total number of romantic or love-related verbal references, settings, or behaviors throughout the film, analyzed by gender. MWV: The total number of verbal references to marriage, weddings, or childbearing, including any depictions of wedding scene events, analyzed by gender. SXV: The total number of sexually-related verbal references, intentional behaviors, or depictions throughout the film, analyzed by gender.

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Totals for Love, Marriage, and Sex Variables across Film Types

		Love, Marriage, and Sex Variables		
Film Type	n (films)	LRV	MWV	SXV
Old Romantic	3			
M		216.00	49.30	20.67
SD		13.00	.58	24.79
Total		648.00	148.00	62.00
New Romantic	3			
M		562.30	41.00	154.00
SD		90.36	6.08	104.56
Total		1687.00	123.00	462.00
Total Romantic	6			
M		389.17	45.17	87.33
SD		198.29	5.98	99.76
Total		2335.00	271.00	524.00
Nonromantic	3			
M		87.00	9.67	26.67
SD		53.70	10.02	42.77
Total		261.00	29.00	80.00
Lesser Known	2			
M		534.00	.00	165.50
SD		59.40	.00	226.98
Total		1068.00	.00	331.00

Note. LRV: The total number of romantic or love-related verbal references, settings, or behaviors throughout the film. MWV: The total number of verbal references to marriage, weddings, or childbearing, including any depictions of wedding scene events throughout the film. SXV: The total number of sexually-related verbal references, intentional behaviors, or depictions throughout the film.

Appendix A: Walt Disney Studios Animation Family Feature Films

Year Theater Release	Name of Film	Status	Minutes
1937,44,52,58,67,75,83,87,93	Snow White & the Seven Dwarfs	*(1st video release, 1994)*	
1940,45,54,62,71,78,84,92	**Pinocchio**[b]	nonromantic	88
1940,46,56,63,69,77,82,85,90	Fantasia		120
1941,49,59,72,76	Dumbo		63
1942,46,56,63,69,77,82,88	Bambi		69
1943,49	Saludos Amigos	*(never released on video)*	
1945,77	**The Three Caballeros**[d]	lesser known	72
1946	Make Mine Music: (Peter and the Wolf, Musicland, & Symphony Hour) (Willie the Operatic Whale, Ferdinand the Bull, & Lambert the Sheepish Lion)		59
1947	Fun and Fancy Free (**Bongo**[d] & Mickey and the Beanstalk)	lesser known	36
1948	Melody Time	*(never released on video)*	
1949	The Adventures of Ichabod & Mr. Toad (Legend of Sleepy Hollow & The Wind in the Willow)		
1950,57,65,73,81,87	**Cinderella**[a]	old romantic	76
1951,74,81	Alice in Wonderland		76
1953,58,69,76,82,89	Peter Pan		76
1955,62,71,80,	**Lady & the Tramp**[a]	old romantic	75
1959,70,79,86	**Sleeping Beauty**[a]	old romantic	75
1961,69,79,85,91	101 Dalmatians		79
1963,72,83	The Sword & the Stone		76
1967,78,84,90	**The Jungle Book**[c]	nonromantic	78
1970,80,87	The Aristocats	*(never released on video)*	
1973,82	Robin Hood		83
1977	The Many Adv. of Winnie the Pooh (Winnie the Pooh & the Honey Tree, Winnie the Pooh & the Blustery Day & Winnie the Pooh & Tigger Too)		
1977,83,89	The Rescuers		76
1981,88	The Fox and the Hound		83
1985	The Black Cauldron	*(never released on video)*	
1986,92	The Great Mouse Detective		74
1988	Oliver & Company	*(never released on video)*	
1989	**The Little Mermaid**[b]	new romantic	83
1990	**The Rescuers Down Under**[c]	nonromantic	77
1991	**Beauty & the Beast**[b]	new romantic	84
1992	**Aladdin**[b]	new romantic	90
1994	The Lion King	**not available at time of study**	
1995	Pocahontas	**not available at time of study**	
1996	The Hunchback of Notre Dame	**not available at time of study**	

[a] three older romantic films; [b] three newer romantic films; [c] three nonromantic films; [d] two less well known films

Appendix B: Lyrics to *Say It with a Slap* in "Bongo"

Male Chorus: *When a bird loves a bird, he can twitter.*
When a puppy falls in love he can yap.
Every pigeon likes to coo, when he says, "I love you,"
But a bear likes to say it with a slap.

Jiminy Cricket: *When a whipporill's in love, he can whipper.*
All the horses neck and all the turtles snap.
Every deer and every dove has a way of making love,
But a bear likes to say it with a slap.

Male Chorus: *You can ask any bear,*
Oh, there's nothing to compare with a love tap strong or weak.

Jiminy Cricket: *So if you're ready for romance, and you ever get the chance,*

Male Chorus: *Grab your girl.*

Jiminy Cricket: *Give her your cheek.*
So, when love comes along, don't be silly. Never, ever waste your time like a sap.

Jiminy & Male Chorus: *Let the others hug and kiss,*
But the bare facts are this,
That a bear likes to do it with a slap,...slap,...slap.

Male Chorus: *Give me a love slap.*

Male square dance caller: *Grab your bears and swing them wide.*
Shake their fur and scratch their hide.
Give her a slap, give her a cuff, around that floor, strut your stuff!
Woo hoo!
You slapped her once and made her...[unintelligible]
Woo hoo!

Male Chorus: *When a bird loves a bird he can twitter.*
When a puppy falls in love he can yap.
Every pigeon likes to coo, when he's says, "I love you,"
But a bear likes to say it with a slap.

Jiminy (talking to Bongo): "Now, you've got it!"

Male Chorus: *When a whipporill's in love, he can whipper.*
All the horses neck and all the turtles snap.
Every deer and every dove has a way of making love,
But a bear likes to say it with a slap.
You can ask any bear,
Oh, there's nothing to compare with a love tap strong or weak.
If you're ready for romance, and you ever get the chance,
Grab your girl.
Give her your cheek.

Jiminy (talking to Bongo): "Go on down there, and let her have it, right on the kisser!"

Jiminy & Male Chorus: *So, when love comes along, don't be silly, never ever waste your time like a sap.*
Let the others hug and kiss,
But the bare facts are this,
That a bear likes to say it with a slap,...slap,...slap.
So, when love comes along, don't be silly. Never, ever waste your time like a sap.
Let the others hug and kiss,
But the bare facts are this,
That a bear likes to say it with slap.